Defining Relevant Terms

GOVT 2306

As we did in 2305, I want to clarify – broadly – what is meant by some of the key terms and concepts we will be using in this class.   
  
The purpose is to ensure that we can have an efficient conversation about the subject matter at hand.

The terms are sovereignty, government, politics, and public policy.   
  
Let’s run through some simple definitions of each and then dig more fully into them.

Here are three definitions of “[sovereignty](http://www.hawaii-nation.org/sovereignty.html)”  
  
1 - supreme power, especially over a body politic  
  
 2 - the quality of having supreme, independent authority over a territory  
  
 3 - the power to do everything in a state without accountability

Here are two, of the many, definitions of “Government”  
  
- The institution, or institutions, with the monopoly on the legitimate use of coercion in society.  
  
- The institutions and procedures through which a land and its people are ruled.

And here are three of the many definitions of “Politics”  
  
1- The authoritative allocation of values in society.  
  
2 - The struggle over who gets what when and how.  
  
3 - Intrigue or maneuvering within a political unit in order to gain control or power

And a couple for Public Policy:  
  
1 - Public policy is a course of action adopted and pursued by a government.   
  
2 - Public policy is a purposive and consistent course of action produced as a response to a perceived problem of a constituency, formulated by a specific political process, and adopted, implemented, and enforced by a public agency.   
  
[*- click here for the source.*](http://profwork.org/pp/study/define.html)

Let’s unpack these a bit more.  
  
Again, this should help you make sense of some of the upcoming material.

Sovereignty  
  
This is simply the concept that refers to where legitimate power lies in a community. It refers to whatever entity in fact has the power to rule.

In the United States, and Texas – along with the other states – governmental power rests with the people. This is referred to as [popular sovereignty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Popular_sovereignty).  
  
We can find proof by reading the preamble of the U.S. and Texas Constitutions.

The U.S. Constitution  
  
We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

The Texas Constitution  
  
Humbly invoking the blessings of Almighty God, the people of the State of Texas, do ordain and establish this Constitution.

The authority of the government of each level rests on the population.  
  
There is an interesting reason for this. It has to do with the problem posed by the assumption that people in the U.S. and Texas are equal before the law. If everyone is equal, no one has the authority to rule over anyone else.

In a federal system like the United States, where people provide the basis for both the national and state governments, sovereignty can be a bit confused. Which level takes priority over the other?  
  
A lot of the conflict we will cover this semester between the US and Texas governments stems from the concept of dual sovereignty. The national and state governments – to a degree – have equal status. This allows for conflict when one attempts to interfere with the activities of the other.

Government  
  
This is the term used to define the institutions that have evolved to establish, implement, and adjudicate rules that determine how a group of people will live together in some agreeable way.

Here are the definitions listed above.  
  
- The institution, or institutions, with the monopoly on the legitimate use of coercion in society  
  
- The institutions and procedures through which a land and its people are ruled.

Governments do three basic things. They make, enforce and adjudicate the law. These three functions are vested in three institutions:   
  
The legislative  
The executive   
The judicial

These are the separated powers.   
  
In upcoming weeks we will note that each of these institutions is designed in one of three articles in the Texas Constitution.

Basic governmental arrangements are established in constitutions, which can be defined as “the basic principles and laws of a nation, state, or social group that determine the powers and duties of the government and guarantee certain rights to the people in it.”  
  
We will hold off a more thorough discussion of constitutions until later.

The simplest way to think of a government as the institution that can compel you to do stuff.   
  
What that stuff is, is a function of the political process, which we will discuss below.

Governments - at their best – are the institutions that allow groups of people to live together in some peaceable manner. They establish the rules which allow for transactions between people – often strangers – to proceed smoothly.   
  
Think of how you share the road with people you do know. If everyone knows the rules and abides by them – no one gets hurt.

Governments have problematic aspects as well.   
  
By controlling the powers of government, certain groups or individuals can dominate others. So the big trick has always been to design governments strong enough to implement what is necessary in order for a society to function, but limit it so that it does not undermine individual rights and freedoms.

In 2305 we discussed the factors related to the development of governments, its major components and different types of governing systems. The constitutional democratic republic that the U.S. is governed by is just one of a variety of different governing systems.  
  
A few things worth remembering from that section:

First, Governments, historically, have evolved either due to coercion or consent. The historical record provides more evidence of governments established by [coercion](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Coercion), but the American system is based on the idea that governments actually evolve due to agreements people enter into voluntarily in order to better provide for mutual security. In this arrangement, people [consent](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Consent) to rule rather than being coerced into it.

Second, in order to in fact rule, government shave to be able to do two things: collect revenue and coerce people to follow the law.   
  
If a government can do neither, then its not really a government.

Third, governments can be arranged in one of three basic ways depending on where sovereignty is located: autocratic, oligarchic and democratic. Respectively these are referred to as the rule of the one, the few and the many.

Fourth, we mentioned that governments tend to do three things. They make, implement and adjudicate the law. These powers are vested in each of three separate institutions in order to limit governmental power. Recall that James Madison argued that the concentration of these three powers in one person or institutions is the very definition of tyranny.

We mentioned in 2305 that each of these systems - autocratic, oligarchic and democratic - had advantages and disadvantages.  
  
And that each is – to some degree – written into the governing system on the national level.

Here’s a brief review:   
  
Autocracies are efficient, but arbitrary  
Oligarchies are knowledgeable, but biased  
Democracies are legitimate, but unstable

Autocracies – where one person is in charge - are efficient. They are the best systems for getting things done.  
  
But they are prone to arbitrary rule. Autocrats can do what they please because there are no meaningful limits on what they choose to do. They are by definition tyrannical.

But – again – they can ensure that things get done, laws get implemented.   
  
Executive branches in the US tend to have an autocratic character in order to ensure that laws are implemented effectively.

We will define executive power in the state of Texas more thoroughly in later sections, but on the state level the chief executive is the governor, but other functions of the state executive are held by offices that are separately elected.

On the local level the chief executive of cities is the mayor – or city manager depending on the nature of the specific design of the government.  
  
Counties are headed by a county judge, who heads the county commissioner’s court.

The simplest definition of [oligarchy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oligarchy) is government by the few.  
  
This can take many different forms depending who those “few” happen to be and why they are in charge.

Perhaps the most commonly recognized oligarchy is an [aristocracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristocracy) where governing is deliberately restricted to a ruling class which is generally selected by birth. The [British aristocracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/British_nobility) is the best example, and was part of what the American colonists rebelled against in the late 18th Century. This social class had special governing privileges including a birth right to membership in the [House of Lords](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_Lords).   
  
See this section on the [landed gentry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Landed_gentry).

This form of aristocracy was established by [primogenitor](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primogeniture) and [entail](http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/entail).   
  
Both policies are prohibited in states constitutions – including Texas’ [Here’s a bit](http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/georgia-constitution-abolishes-primogeniture-and-entail) from the History Channel on Georgia abolishing the practice in 1777.

A more contemporary type of oligarchy is a [plutocracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Plutocracy), which is a governing systems that is dominated by a nation’s wealthiest citizens.   
  
Usually the wealthy are able to use existing rules to increase their influence over a government, this includes campaign finance and lobbying rules.

The United States – and especially Texas – is argued to be increasingly plutocratic.   
  
For an example: [Millionaires' Club: For First Time, Most Lawmakers are Worth $1 Million-Plus](http://www.opensecrets.org/news/2014/01/millionaires-club-for-first-time-most-lawmakers-are-worth-1-million-plus.html).

Oligarchies allow for knowledgeable rule, but are subject to bias. The courts in the US tend to have an autocratic design so that we have judges who have the knowledge to be able to make just decisions on the controversies that come before them.

They are the system designed to be insulated the most from public pressures.   
  
This is to ensure that judges rule fairly, based on the facts at hand, not subject to public pressure.

Democracy

The simple definition of [democracy](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democracy) is rule by the many, but there are many different types of democracy.  
  
We’ll just look at two:   
Direct   
Indirect

In a direct – or pure – democracy people rule directly, meaning that the general population has the opportunity to vote directly on public matters  
  
In an indirect – or representative – democracy people select representatives that then vote on public matters.

The US and Texas are the latter type of democracy.  
  
This is what it means to be a republic. One difference between the states is whether they allow opportunities for the electorate to vote directly for some items.

When we cover this further in a future lecture we will make a distinction between states that were impacted by the progressive movement in the early 20th Century and those that were not.

Those states altered their constitutions to allow for statewide [initiative, referenda](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Initiatives_and_referendums_in_the_United_States) and [recall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Recall_election) elections.   
  
While local government in the state allow for them, they are not allowed statewide in Texas.

For more detail [click on the site on the website](http://www.ncsl.org/research/elections-and-campaigns/initiative-referendum-and-recall-overview.aspx) of the National Conference of State Legislatures.

In 2305 we spent time discussing different ways to define democracy – the simplest being majority rule. A more expansive definition also includes the requirement that democracies include universal adult suffrage and protection for minority rights.

Tension exists between the values of majority rule and minority rights.  
Majorities commonly attempt to minimize the rights of minorities through the democratic process. Majorities can control democratic institution and turn them – effectively into tyrannies.   
  
This is called [tyranny of the majority](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyranny_of_the_majority).

“The one pervading evil of democracy is the tyranny of the majority, or rather of that party, not always the majority, that succeeds, by force or fraud, in carrying elections.” – Lord Acton.

Enhancing the rights of minorities often involves limiting the majoritarian democracy.  
  
This is one of the ways that we see tension between the government f the state of Texas and the national government. We’ll discuss this further later in the semester.

Democratic Legitimacy  
  
Its suggested that the principle benefit of democracy is that it allows for a direct connection to be drawn between the electorate and the government. This makes the government – at least in theory – more susceptible to the preferences of the general population, which means that it is more likely to be considered to be legitimate.

But while democracies offer legitimacy, but can be unstable and prone to mob rule. Legislatures are the institutions designed to provide that connection between the people and the law. So it becomes the democratic branch of government.

Legislatures are intended to be where diverse viewpoints are heard publicly and policies are debated and – if the majority accepts them - adopted. But legislative assemblies are also where conflicts over policy are most likely to come to a head. They can appear remarkably unstable due to the debate that is commonly heard in them – but remember that this is part of what they are all about. This is what legislatures are for.

Now let’s switch to the term “Politics.”  
  
Earlier it was defined as follows:

1- The authoritative allocation of values in society.  
  
2 - The struggle over who gets what when and how.  
  
3 - Intrigue or maneuvering within a political unit in order to gain control or power  
  
4 – The art of what’s possible.

There are three dominant political institutions:  
  
political parties  
interest groups  
the media

Politics refers to the external forces that influence what the people in governing institutions do.   
  
Political battles tend to be about values and interests.

Political fights tend to be over what the governing institutions should do, how they do it, and who do it. These can be struggles over what people can be allowed to do (have abortions, use contraceptives, enter into gay marriages), what benefits people or groups can receive (where does the tax burden fall, what businesses receive incentives and subsidies) and what activities help certain groups and parties control governing institutions.

The most important aspect of politics is the ongoing struggle to control the institutions that then make decisions on values and interests. The principle goal of political institutions is to control the governing institutions. Generally this involves competing in elections to win control of the legislative, executive and judicial branches.  
  
In Texas, the Republican Party has effectively controlled all statewide institutions since 1994. Democrats dominate some of the larger cities, which helps explain conflict between those tow levels of government.

“The art of what’s possible” refers to the fact that politics requires compromise. Bills have to go through a complicated process in order to become law. They often change quite a bit as a result.   
  
A good number of policies that exist look the way they do because of this need for compromise.

A quick word on public opinion  
  
Like the other states and the nation as a whole, is a democratic republic which rests on the general population.

The policies Texas adopts are assumed to be based on the general preferences of the public.  
  
But governing officials are actually more attuned to the interests of those who participate actively in politics. This isn’t necessarily the same as the majority. We will cover this more when we discuss interest groups later in the semester.

This is an important point that we will touch on repeated throughout the class. Its not “the people” that count when it comes to determining what Texas government does, its what “the participants” want that really matters.

As we will see in an upcoming set of slides, Texas – statewide – contains majorities that tend to support conservative policies. And even when clear majorities do not support these policies, the dominant political institutions do.

Texas tends to be a low tax, low services state, that also supports conservative social policies.   
  
But there is no consensus on this.

A quick comment on ideology.

In 2305 we defined ideology as a set of issue positions based on an underlying value.  
  
A value being a sense of right and wrong and an issue position being an opinion on a topical issue.

We focused attention on the importance on the importance of three dominant values: Liberty, Equality, and Tradition.

In Texas, the values of liberty and tradition tend to dominate the value of equality.   
  
This isn’t the case in other states or, depending on who controls national institutions, the national government. As we will see, this is the source of the bulk of political conflict in the US.

Many people do not spending too much time figuring out how they should be positioned on different issues and therefore adopt a primary value and use cues received from trusted sources to determine how they should position themselves on specific issues.

They often adopt a primary media source because is confirms their value system and allows them to interpret events in a manner that conforms to that value.  
  
Again, this creates conflict. People who watch – for example – Fox News have a different world view than those who watch the mainstream media.

People whose primary value is equality or liberty are generally in favor of gay marriage.  
  
It allows different people to be treated equally before the law, as well as the freedom to enter into relationships they chose.

Traditionalists – which also refers to the religious – see this as an affront to the traditional definition of marriage.

They are all correct within their own spheres. The question is, how have a given value system and how many then come to the conclusion about the policy due to their value system?

To complicate things further, not all local areas – especially the large metropolitan areas – share these positions, so areas of conflict do exist. The cities of Austin, Houston and Dallas tend to be more liberal than the state as a whole.  
  
We will also dig into the conflict this creates later.

As with other states, certain issues are more important in Texas, based on which interests are dominant within the state, and the content of the political culture – which we cover more fully elsewhere.

No surprise, but energy, commerce, aerospace and a handful of other issues are especially important in the state and local areas.   
  
In the local area, this includes medical and high tech research.

Now let’s introduce ourselves to some of the dominant political institutions in the state and local areas.  
  
The goal is to become familiar with these terms so you can use them fluently as we proceed.

Political parties are groups of individuals organized formally who unite to compete in elections. By winning office they can control governing institutions and are in a good position to implement their desired policies.

As is the case nationally, and in each of the states, the two dominant parties in the state are the Democratic and Republican parties. But the state parties are very different than the national parties and can compete with it to determine what the party really stands for.

Whereas each party competes with each other relatively evenly nationally, Texas has a tendency to be controlled by one party.

Until the 1960s, the Democratic Party dominated politics utterly, but shifts in the national Democratic Party led conservative members to gradually leave and join the Republican Party.

By the early 1990s, the Republican Party became the dominant force in the state. They are not as strong as the Democrats were at their peak, but they dominate state wide offices like the governor, and other executive offices, the US Senator. They have also recently had comfortable majorities in the Texas Legislature.

Rule of thumb: There is a party organization in every level of government where there is an election.   
  
This is true down to the precinct.

Point to remember: Each party is not only organized at the state level, but also at the county and precinct levels. Conflict between each is common.

In addition to looking at the state Democratic and Republican Parties, we will be looking at area county parties as well as local clubs.

While state elections – including county elections – are partisan (meaning that candidates run with party labels), city elections are not.   
  
City and single purpose government elections (ISD’s, etc…) are non-partisan.

Interest groups are also defined as groups of people organized to pursue a shared policy goal, but interest groups are narrowly organized to obtain that goal – not to contest in elections.

While diverse groups operate within the state, business groups and those affiliated with social conservatives – the Christian Right – are especially influential within the state.   
  
The power of those affiliated with liberal causes – unions, trial lawyers, the public sector – have been minimized in recent decades.

The press in Texas is dominated by a handful of newspapers, none of which has a huge impact nationally. These are probably the three most important: Austin American Statesman, Dallas Morning News, Houston Chronicle.  
  
A recent entry in the market is the online newspaper [The Texas Tribune](http://www.texastribune.org/).

As with all newspapers and media sources, they contain editorial boards that take positions on policy issues and make recommendations for candidates for various elected offices.  
  
This is what makes them – at least partially – political organizations, especially when a newspaper is owned and controlled by a individual or groups with a stake in the political process.

Let’s conclude with a bit more on public policy  
  
1 - Public policy is a course of action adopted and pursued by a government.   
  
2 - Public policy is a purposive and consistent course of action produced as a response to a perceived problem of a constituency, formulated by a specific political process, and adopted, implemented, and enforced by a public agency.   
  
[*- click here for the source.*](http://profwork.org/pp/study/define.html)

Public policy is the stuff government does (or chooses not to do) to deal with a problem that has emerged on the public’s agenda.  
  
In a federal system, responsibilities for public policies are divided between the national, state and local levels. These also overlap, which creates opportunities for conflict. We will monitor the nature of this conflict regularly on the blog.

National policies tend to be those that are delegated to the national government in the Constitution. These are mostly commercial and military in nature. Foreign policy is almost fully controlled by the national government.

The constitution also contains the Tenth Amendment which establishes that powers (policies) not restricted to the states are reserved to them – which carries the assumption that the national government cannot pass laws about them.

Sometimes these policies impact commerce, which the national government has used to justify passing laws that affect police powers.   
  
Crime, for example, impacts the flow of commerce. The national government has been able to justify getting involved in interstate crime on that basis.

The Legislative Budget Board lists the following as distinct areas of public policy in Texas:  
  
Health and Human Services  
Education  
Public Safety and Criminal Justice  
Natural Resources  
Business and Economic Development  
Regulatory

Cities also have unique responsibilities for establishing and implementing public policies. The best way to get handle on what these are is to look through a city’s code of ordinances. We’ll walk through some in later sections, but if you want a head start, click on these:   
  
[Alvin Code of Ordinances](http://www.alvin-tx.gov/default.aspx?name=ps.code).   
[Houston Code of Ordinances](http://www.houstontx.gov/codes/).

That’s enough to get started.  
  
Summary: The simple purpose of this section was to get you comfortable with the basic terminology and concepts we will be using throughout this class. This provides a taste of what we will be hitting harder over the next few weeks.